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Cutbacks encouraged spying

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There are undoubtedly far more spies and trouble-making agents working successfully against the United States today than there once were for the same reason that one cat does not catch as many mice as two cats.

For security reasons the total number of U.S. intelligence personnel is supposed to be a secret but during the 1970s when Congress was reducing the U.S. intelligence community to a shambles, several members let it slip that intelligence agency manpower had been cut from 142,000 to 80,000, a reduction of 43 percent, in seven years.

There were further drastic cuts. In 1983 the Senate Intelligence Committee reported that the cuts had seriously limited and degraded the intelligence community's capacity to meet the nation's intelligence needs.

This ability was damaged further by the three presidential executive orders governing all U.S. intelligence activities since 1976 which have given attorneys general — amateurs in intelligence — control over all aspects of U.S. intelligence and counterintelligence activities.

The childish guidelines issued as a result further crippled U.S. intelligence operations.

The ratio of FBI agents to communist bloc known or suspected spies fell from one-on-one in the early 1960s to one-on-four-or-five in the late 1970s.

James Angleton, CIA chief of counterintelligence from the late 1940s, when Soviet espionage and "active measures" were expanding, was forced by CIA Director William Colby to resign in 1974. The entire CIA top command quit in protest.

CIA Director Stansfield Turner fired more than 800 officers, mostly older, experienced ones, in the "Halloween Massacre" of October 1977. The CIA lost more than 1,200 officers to retirement in 1977-79 and the FBI lost about 1,000 agents through budget cuts in 1972-78.

Did this immense personnel and quality loss and the corresponding multiplication of crippling guidelines and restrictions have anything to do with the rise of successful anti-U.S. espionage and opinion-twisting "disinformation campaigns" and the rash of successful terrorist actions against U.S. embassies, civilians, diplomats and servicemen?

Of course it did. The damage done by the spies, covert operations agents and terrorists cannot be undone. But with determination, sagacity, education, understanding and action. Including the restoration of many of its best former officers, the U.S. intelligence community may eventually be made strong and sound enough to carry out its function of protecting the nation and its citizens — if we have learned our lesson.